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Administration Replacing Derided Terror Alert System

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Created *04/21/11*

As transparency advocates, we often advocate for government to make more information available to the public. However, sometimes the problem comes when government does make information available – and the information is wrong, confusing, misleading, or manipulative.

In that spirit, let us bid good riddance to the Homeland Security Advisory System [1], the color-coded terror alerts that purported to warn us of the risk of terrorist attack since its introduction in March 2002. No more: the alerts will be replaced by the new National Terrorism Advisory System [2], beginning April 26.

The old system was widely criticized, most prominently for failing to actually inform. As security expert Bruce Schneier wrote [3], "Because they are so vague and so frequent, and because they don't recommend any useful actions that people can take, terror threat warnings don't prevent terrorist attacks."

Then what was the old system good for? Well, scaring us, for one thing. The warnings were widely distributed in the media, in government buildings, and above all, in airports. They never expired, and the threat level never went down. "Because it signaled some ambiguous sense of 'threat' without providing a scintilla of information the public could use," wrote [4] the Cato Institute's Jim Harper, "it merely kept Americans ignorant and addled."

Of course, we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. If the government has credible information about a threat – information that could save lives – it should tell the public, as quickly and as accurately as possible.

Thankfully, the new system seems designed to be more specific and more actionable. According to a statement [5] by Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, future alerts would include:

> a clear statement that there is an imminent threat or elevated threat, a summary of the potential threat, actions being taken to ensure public safety, and steps that

individuals and communities can take to protect themselves and help prevent, mitigate or respond to the threat. These alerts will also have a specified end date.

While much will depend on how the system is operated, the new system looks to be much more useful and less unnecessarily frightening. "Fear does not encourage preparedness," said [6] Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), ranking member of the House Committee on Homeland Security. "Today's announcement marks an end to the era of color-coded scare tactics."

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeland_Security_Advisory_System
[2] http://www.dhs.gov/files/programs/ntas.shtm
[3] http://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2004/10/do_terror_alert.html
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